Supreme Court, U.S.
FILED

97-1407 FEB 23 1998

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NO. _____

IN THE UNITED STATES SUPREME COURT
OCTOBER, 1997, TERM

THOMAS L. FALKENBERRY,
Petitioner

vs.

JOYCE K. TAYLOR,
Respondent

ON PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI
TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE ELEVENTH CIRCUIT

PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI

Richard Lynn Ducote
of the Louisiana Bar
and the Supreme Court Bar
Counsel of Record for Petitioner
Suite 1160
1100 Tulane Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana 70112
(504) 524-0095

22 pp

QUESTION PRESENTED FOR REVIEW

IN LIGHT OF *PENNZOIL V. TEXACO* AND *MITCHUM V. FOSTER*, DOES THE "ROOKER-FELDMAN DOCTRINE" PRECLUDE FEDERAL COURT SUBJECT MATTER JURISDICTION OVER A SUIT FOR A DECLARATORY JUDGMENT OF UNCONSTITUTIONALITY UNDER 28 U.S.C. SEC. 2201, AND INJUNCTIVE RELIEF UNDER 42 U.S.C SEC. 1983, TO MERELY BLOCK THE PROSPECTIVE APPLICATION OF A SELF-EFFECTING CONSTITUTIONALLY INFIRM PROCEDURAL REMEDY LACKING DUE PROCESS SAFEGUARDS CONTAINED IN A STATE COURT JUDGMENT, WHERE THE SUBSTANTIVE MERITS OF THE STATE COURT JUDGMENT ARE NOT CHALLENGED?

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CITATIONS TO THE DECISIONS BELOW

1) Thomas L. Falkenberry v. Joyce K. Taylor, United States District Court for the Northern District of Georgia, Rome Division (Docket No. 4:95-CV-0151). Summary Judgment granted December 10, 1996. Unreported.

2) **Thomas L. Falkenberry v. Joyce K. Taylor**, United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit (Docket No. 97-8038). Opinion affirming district court issued November 25, 1997. Unreported.

STATEMENT OF JURISDICTION

The decision of the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals was rendered on November 25, 1997. No rehearing was sought. This Court's jurisdiction to grant certiorari is premised on **28 U.S.C. Sec. 1254**.

RELEVANT STATUTORY PROVISIONS

28 U.S.C. Sec. 1257:

State courts; certiorari.

(a) Final judgments or decrees rendered by the highest court of a State in which a decision could be had, may be reviewed by the Supreme Court by writ of certiorari where the validity of a treaty or statute of the United States is drawn in question or where the validity of a statute of any State is drawn into question on the ground of its being repugnant to the Constitution, treaties, or laws of the United States, or where any title, right, privilege, or immunity is specially set up or claimed under the Constitution or the treaties or statutes of, or any commission held or authority exercised under, the United States.

* * *

42 U.S.C. Sec. 1983:

Every person who, under color of any statute, ordinance, regulation, custom, or usage, of any State or Territory or the District of Columbia, subjects, or causes to be subjected, any citizen of the United States or other person within the jurisdiction thereof to the deprivation of any rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws, shall be liable to the party injured in an action at law, suit in equity, or other proceeding for redress...

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

Petitioner Thomas L. Falkenberry and Respondent Joyce K. Taylor were married on January 6, 1988, in Gwinnett County, Georgia. On October 20, 1988, their son Zachary Lee Falkenberry was born. He is now nine (9) years old. The parties were eventually granted a decree of divorce on January 3, 1994, by the Gwinnett County Superior Court (Case No. 92A-06535-5). The final decree of divorce incorporated a child custody order entered by the Juvenile Court of Gwinnett County on September 7, 1993 (Case No. 93-0590-2). That order granted both parties "joint legal and physical custody," but made Mr. Falkenberry the primary, or day-to-day, custodian of the child. One clause contained in the order, however, eventually engendered the litigation now before the Court. Paragraph 1(n) provided:

> In the event that either the Wife [Ms. Taylor] or the Husband [Mr. Falkenberry] moves from the Metropolitan Atlanta area, i.e. Metropolitan Statistical Area as defined by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the primary residence of the Child [Zachary] shall be with the non-moving parent. The parent who relocated shall have the same visitation

> rights with the Child as now set forth for the Wife and the party receiving primary physical custody of the Child shall have the same rights as set forth for the Husband.

Mr. Falkenberry and Zachary reside in Cartersville, Georgia, within the Atlanta Metropolitan Statistical Area. However, Mr. Falkenberry, a testing engineer, works in Chattanooga, Tennessee, some eighty-two (82) miles, and one and a half (1 1/2) hours drive time each way, from Cartersville. Consequently, because he is devoted to his son and strongly desires to remain his custodial parent, Mr. Falkenberry works fewer hours, and earns less money, so that he can spend more time with Zachary.

Of course, it would make much more sense for them to move to Chattanooga. Ms. Taylor, who lives in Snellville, Georgia, would have just as much time with her son as she enjoys under the current plan. Furthermore, as Mr. Falkenberry has agreed to handle all of the transportation, she would not be inconvenienced. But, under the terms of the custody decree, the moment he moved into Tennessee, Mr. Falkenberry would automatically lose custody of Zachary to Ms. Taylor without any further judicial proceedings. Likewise, Zachary would lose his father's role in his daily life.

To contest this self-effecting custody transfer, on May 19, 1995, Mr. Falkenberry filed a Complaint for Declaratory Judgment and Injunctive Relief Under 42 U.S.C. Section 1983 , naming Ms. Taylor as the defendant, in the United States District Court for the Northern District of Georgia (Rome Division) (Case No. 4:95-CV-0151-HLM). He asserted federal jurisdiction under 28 U.S.C. 1331(a) and the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. He sought a declaratory judgment under 28 U.S.C. Sec. 2201 that the particular provision of the custody order cited above violated the Fourteenth Amendment; an injunction prohibiting Ms. Taylor from enforcing the relocation provision, and attorney's fees under 42 U.S.C. Sec. 1988. The central allegations of this federal suit are that:

> The provision of the Custody Order...if enforced, deprives Plaintiff of substantive and procedural process and equal protection of the law as provided for by the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution and further deprives him of the right [of] interstate migration. Said provision, further, authorized Defendant [Ms. Taylor] to act under color of state law to change the custody of the parties' minor child without a hearing in violation of 42 U.S.C. Section 1983. (Paragraph 12).

On August 26, 1996, Joyce Taylor moved for summary judgment. She argued that 1) she was not a state actor for the purposes of a Sec. 1983 action; 2) there was no showing that Mr. Falkenberry was denied substantive due process; 3) the federal court lacked jurisdiction under the "Rooker-Feldman Doctrine" and the "Domestic Relations Abstention Doctrine"; and 4) the claims were barred by res judicata and collateral estoppel, especially "in light of the fact that Plaintiff failed to utilize state court review procedures."

On December 10, 1996, District Judge Harold L. Murphy granted the summary judgment and dismissed the suit. Mr. Falkenberry's companion summary judgment motion was denied. The court found 1) that Mr. Falkenberry had standing to pursue declaratory and injunctive relief because he adequately alleged an immediate and real threat of injury, his loss of Zachary's custody; 2) Ms. Taylor was not a Sec. 1983 state actor; and 3) the "Rooker-Feldman Doctrine" precluded federal jurisdiction [A- 2].

Mr. Falkenberry perfected a timely appeal to the Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit (Case No.97-8-038). On November 25, 1997, in an unpublished one sentence *per curiam* decision the court affirmed the district court's judgment, based only upon the lack of federal court subject-matter jurisdiction under the "Rooker-Feldman Doctrine"[A-1]. The court did not address any other issue. No rehearing was sought.

ARGUMENT

The "Rooker-Feldman Doctrine" derives from the cases of **Rooker v. Fidelity Trust Company**, 263 U.S. 413 (1923) and **District of Columbia Court of Appeals v. Feldman**, 460 U.S. 462 (1983). Simply stated, the doctrine holds that federal district courts do not have jurisdiction to review the judgments of states courts, since such review is reserved to the Supreme Court by **28 U.S.C. Sec. 1257**. Despite the simplicity of its intent, the extent and ramifications of the doctrine have perplexed courts and commentators.[1] **Feldman**'s primary contribution to the concept was the rule that jurisdiction would not lie to review issues that were "inextricably intertwined" with those actually litigated in the state courts. Defining what issues are and are not "inextricably intertwined" is especially confounding to jurists and scholars alike.[2]

Nonetheless, Petitioner respectfully suggests that in light of **Pennzoil v. Texaco**, 481 U.S. 1 (1987) and **Mitchum v. Foster**, 407 U.S. 225 (1972), the suit rejected in this case

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[1] *See, e.g.* Gary Thompson, Note, *The Rooker-Feldman Doctrine and the Subject Matter Jurisdiction of Federal Courts*, 42 **Rutgers L. Rev.** 859 (1990).

[2] ***Id.***, at 880-884.

is properly within the federal district court's subject matter jurisdiction, and beyond the scope of the "Rooker-Feldman Doctrine", since it only seeks to enjoin the prospective application of unconstitutional procedural devices contained in the state court judgment under **42 U.S.C. Secs. 1983** and **28 U.S.C. Sec. 2201**, without contesting the substantive merits of the state court decision.

I. THE AUTOMATIC CUSTODY TRANSFER PROVISION OF THE STATE COURT ORDER UNCONSTITUTIONALLY DEPRIVES PETITIONER OF HIS RIGHTS TO INTERSTATE TRAVEL AND DUE PROCESS.

The provision of the custody order which automatically deprives Mr. Falkenberry of the custody of his son, without a hearing to determine the child's best interests, solely because he moves across state lines deprives him of significant Constitutional rights. In **Jones v. Helms**, 452 U.S. 412 (1981), this Court stated that:

> It is, of course, well settled that the right of a citizen to travel from one State to another and to take up residence in the State of his choice is protected by the Federal Constitution. Although the textual source of this right has been the subject of debate, its fundamental

nature has consistently been recognized by this Court. at 417-418.

The right to interstate travel for the benefit of family members was emphatically embraced by this Court in **Edwards v. California**, 314 U.S. 160 (1941). In this case, although young Zachary would have the indisputable benefits of greater financial resources to assist in his upbringing as a result of his father's increased income, while at the same time preserving the amount of quality time he would spend with his father, without diminishing his contact with his mother, the move ipso facto would destroy his security for no valid reason. Several state courts have found such blanket prohibitions against interstate relocation in child custody cases unconstitutional. *See*, **Jamarillo v. Jamarillo**, 823 P.2d 299 (N.M.1992); **In re Marriage of Fingert**, 271 Cal. Rptr. 389 (Cal.App.1990); **In re Marriage of Sheley**, 895 P.2d 850 (Wash.App.1995). Even the appellate court in Georgia, where this case arises, has recently held in another Gwinnett County case that relocation alone is insufficient to warrant a modification of a child's custody.[3] **In Interest of R.R.**, 474

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[3] In a prior decision, the Georgia Court of Appeals upheld a self-effecting custody transfer based on relocation without addressing any constitutional issues. **Carr v. Carr**, 429 S.E.2d 95 (Ga.App.1993).

S.E.2d 12 (Ga.App.1996). Extensive commentary on the problem has also arisen in the legal literature for many years now.[4] Thus, Mr. Falkenberry's right to interstate travel is unconstitutionally restricted.

Next, Mr. Falkenberry's due process right to a hearing prior to an order depriving him of his child's custody is violated by the standing provision. **Stanley v. Illinois**, 405 U.S. 645 (1972); **Mathews v. Eldridge**, 424 U.S. 391 (1976). *See, also* **M.L.B. v. S.L.J.**, _____U.S. _____, 117 S.Ct. 555 (1996); Nancy B. Shernow, *Recognizing Constitutional Rights of Custodial Parents: The Primacy of the Post-Divorce Family in Child Custody Modification Proceedings*, 35 **U.C.L.A. L. Rev**. 677 (1988).

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[4] Arthur B. LaFrance, *Child Custody and Relocation: A Constitutional Perspective*, **University of Louisville J. of Family Law** 1 (1996); Edward Sivin, Note, *Residence Restrictions on Custodial Parents: Implications for the Right to Travel*, **12 Rutgers L.J.** 341 (1981); Paula Raines, *Joint Custody and the Right to Travel: Legal and Psychological Implications*, 24 **J. Family Law** 625 (1986); Blair Hoffman, Note, *Restrictions on a Parent's Right to Travel in Child Custody Cases: Possible Constitutional Questions*, 6 **U.C. Davis L. Rev**. 1981 (1973).

II. FEDERAL COURTS HAVE SUBJECT MATTER JURISDICTION TO ENJOIN THE PROSPECTIVE ENFORCEMENT OF UNCONSTITUTIONAL PROCEDURAL PROVISIONS OF STATE COURT JUDGMENTS, DESPITE THE "ROOKER-FELDMAN DOCTRINE."

In **Mitchum v. Foster**, 407 U.S. 225 (1972), this Court held that 28 U.S.C. Sec. 1983 unquestionably authorizes a federal court to enjoin state court proceedings in order to prevent the immediate deprivation of an individual's constitutional rights. That decision appears perfectly applicable to Mr. Falkenberry's suit below.

Next, the effect of this Court's holding in **Pennzoil v. Texaco**, 481 U.S. 1 (1987), was to remove from the "Rooker-Feldman Doctrine" federal suits filed to protect constitutional due process rights, where the merits of the underlying decision are not challenged. Even though some consideration of the merits is necessary, where the purpose of the federal action is "separable from and collateral to" the state court judgment, federal subject matter jurisdiction still exists.[5]

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[5] *See*, Gary Thompson, Note, *The Rooker-Feldman Doctrine and the Subject Matter Jurisdiction of Federal Courts*, 42 **Rutgers L. Rev.** 859

Here, Mr. Falkenberry only asks that if the Gwinnett County court wants to take Zachary from his custody, that it first give him a hearing and allow him to present evidence as to what Zachary's best interest dictates. He in no way wants the federal court to determine who should eventually have custody of the child.

THEREFORE, THE DECISION OF THE ELEVENTH CIRCUIT COURT OF APPEALS HAS DECIDED AN IMPORTANT QUESTION OF FEDERAL LAW IN A WAY THAT CONFLICTS WITH THE CITED RELEVANT DECISIONS OF THIS COURT. ACCORDINGLY, IT IS URGED THAT A WRIT OF CERTIORARI BE GRANTED, AND THEREAFTER, THE DECISION BELOW BE REVERSED AND THE MATTER REMANDED FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION.

Respectfully submitted,
Richard Lynn Ducote
of the Louisiana Bar
and the Supreme Court Bar
Counsel of Record for Petitioner
Suite 1160
1100 Tulane Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana 70112
(504) 524-0095

(1990), at 884-891; Note, *Texaco v. Pennzoil Co.: Beyond a Crude Analysis of the Rooker-Feldman Doctrine's Preclusion of Federal Jurisdiction*, 41 **U. of Miami L. Rev.** 625 (1987).

APPENDIX

[DO NOT PUBLISH]

IN THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE ELEVENTH CIRCUIT

No. 97-8038
Non-Argument Calendar

D.C. Docket No. 4:95-CV-0151-HLM

THOMAS L. FALKENBERRY,

Plaintiff-Appellant

versus

JOYCE K. TAYLOR,

Defendant-Appellee

Appeal from the United States District Court
for the Northern District of Georgia

(November 25, 1997)

Before HATCHETT, Chief Judge, EDMONSON and COX, Circuit Judges.

PER CURIAM:

The District Court lacked subject-matter jurisdiction over Falkenberry's claims for the reasons stated in Part II.B.3 of its opinion and order dated December 10, 1996.

AFFIRMED.

A-2

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF GEORGIA
ROME DIVISION

[FILED
DECEMBER 10.1996]

THOMAS L. FALKENBERRY,
Plaintiff,

v.

CIVIL ACTION
4:95-CV-151-HLM

JOYCE K. TAYLOR,
Defendant

ORDER

This civil rights case is before the Court on Plaintiff's Motion for Summary Judgment [6], Defendant's Motion to Amend Answer [10] and Defendant's Motion for Summary Judgment [11].

* * *

[Only Section II.B.3 of the Order is reprinted here].

3. Whether the Court Has Jurisdiction to Review the Constitutionality of the Juvenile Court's Child Custody Order

"According to the Rooker-Feldman doctrine, 'a United States district court has no authority to review final judgments of a state court in judicial proceedings.' " Powell v. Powell, 80 F.3d 464, 466 (11th Cir.1996) (quoting District of Columbia Court of Appeals v. Feldman, 460 U.S. 462, 482 (1983)). "Review of such judgments may be had only in the United States Supreme Court." Powell, 80 F.3d at 466. "The

doctrine applies not only to claims actually raised in the state court, but also to claims that were not raised in the state court but are 'inextricably intertwined' with the state court's judgment." Id. (quoting Feldman, 460 U.S. at 483 n.16); Liedel v. Juvenile Court of Madison County, 891 F.2d 1542, 1545 (11th Cir.1990) (federal district court may not decide federal issues that are 'inextricably intertwined' with state court's judgment even if plaintiff failed to raise federal issues in state court proceedings). [2]

In Liedel, the plaintiffs sought to have a federal district court enjoin a state juvenile court from enforcing orders entered in a child custody proceeding. Id. at 1545. The plaintiffs claimed the juvenile court's orders were constitutionally infirm. Id. at 1544.

The Liedel court reasoned that the plaintiffs' desired relief "would effectively nullify" the juvenile court's orders. Id. at 1545. The court concluded that, because the plaintiffs' suit effectively sought to void a final state court judgment, the federal district court lacked jurisdiction to hear the matter. Id. at 1545, 1546.

In the present case, Plaintiff claims Paragraph 1(n) of the Custody Order is unconstitutional. Plaintiff asks the Court to enjoin enforcement of Paragraph 1(n). As in Liedel, this injunctive remedy "would effectively nullify" a final state court judgment. [3] Liedel, 891 F.2d at 1545. The Court, therefore, concludes that Plaintiff's action does not fall within the jurisdiction of this Court.

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[2] The Supreme Court has stated "the fact that we may not have jurisdiction to review a final state-court judgment because of a petitioner's failure to raise his constitutional claims in state court does not mean that a United States district court should have jurisdiction over the claims. By failing to raise his claims in state court a plaintiff may forfeit his right to obtain review of the state-court decision in any federal court." Feldman, 460 U.S. at 484 n.16.

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[3] The Custody Order became a final state court order when Plaintiff failed to file an appeal of the order within 30 days of its entry. See O.C.G.A. Sec. 5-6-35 (d) (requiring appeals of divorce or child custody orders to be filed with Clerk of Georgia Supreme Court within 30 days of entry of order.)

Supreme Court, U.S.
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No. 97-1407

In The

Supreme Court of the United States

October Term, 1997

THOMAS L. FALKENBERRY,

Petitioner,

vs.

JOYCE K. TAYLOR,

Respondent.

On Petition for Writ of Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit

RESPONDENT'S BRIEF IN OPPOSITION

DOUGLAS H. PIKE
118 East Trinity Place
Decatur, Georgia 30030
(404) 479-4400

FRED L. CAVALLI
118 East Trinity Place
Decatur, Georgia 30030
(404) 479-4400

Attorneys for Respondent

146103

(800) 274-3321 • (800) 359-6859
A DIVISION OF COUNSEL PRESS

Lutz Appellate Services, Inc.

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

I. Where Petitioner failed to exercise his right to seek review from the lower State court's child custody order in the State's appellate courts, is the Petitioner precluded from seeking relief in a federal District Court?

II. Is there an exception to the "Rooker-Feldman Doctrine" which would permit Petitioner to seek relief in federal District Court from a self-executing child custody modification provision where Petitioner could have availed himself of the state courts for the relief he now seeks in federal court?

III. Where Petitioner does not seek a writ of certiorari from that portion of the District Court's holding that the Respondent is not a state actor, is Petitioner restricted from maintaining a § 1983 action seeking injunctive and other relief?

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ADDITIONAL RELEVANT STATUTORY PROVISIONS

O.C.G.A. § 5-6-35

> Cases requiring application for appeal; contents, filing, and service of application; exhibits; response by opposing party; issuance of appellate court order regarding appeal; procedure; supersedeas; jurisdiction of appeal.
>
> (a) Appeals in the following cases shall be taken as provided in this Code section:
>
> (2) Appeals from judgments or orders in divorce, alimony, child custody, and other domestic relations cases including, but not limited to, granting or refusing a divorce or temporary or permanent alimony, awarding or refusing to change child custody, or holding or declining to hold persons in contempt of such alimony or child custody judgment or orders;
>
> * * *
>
> (d) The application shall be filed with the clerk of the Supreme Court or the Court of Appeals within 30 days of the entry of the order, decision, or judgment complained of . . .

O.C.G.A. § 19-9-1

> (b) In any case in which a judgment awarding the custody of a minor has been entered, on the motion of any party or on the motion of the court,

that portion of the judgment effecting visitation rights between the parties and their minor children may be subject to review and modification or alteration without the necessity of any showing of a change in any material conditions and circumstances of either party or the minor, provided that the review and modification or alteration shall not be had more often than once in each two-year period following the date of entry of the judgment. However, this subsection shall not limit or restrict the power of the court to enter a judgment relating to the custody of a minor in any new proceeding based upon a showing of a change in any material conditions or circumstances of a party or the minor.

O.C.G.A. § 19-9-3

(b) In any case in which a judgment awarding the custody of a minor has been entered, on the motion of any party or on the motion of the court, that portion of the judgment effecting visitation rights between the parties and their minor children may be subject to review and modification or alteration without the necessity of any showing of a change in any material conditions and circumstances of either party or the minor, provided that the review and modification or alteration shall not be had more often than once in each two-year period following the date of entry of the judgment. However, this subsection shall not limit or restrict the power of the court to enter a judgment relating to the custody of a minor in any new proceeding based upon a showing of a change in any material conditions or circumstances of a party or the minor.

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

A. Course of the Proceedings

This appeal is from the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeal's affirming the Northern District Court of Georgia's grant of Respondent's Motion for Summary Judgment and denial of Petitioner's Motion for Summary Judgment in the underlying action; to wit: *Thomas L. Falkenberry v. Joyce K. Taylor*, Civil Action File No. 4:95-CV-151-HLM, (N.D. Ga., Rome Division, Dec. 10, 1996). Petitioner had instituted a 42 U.S.C. § 1983 action seeking injunctive relief. More specifically, Petitioner sought to have the District Court declare as unconstitutional a certain child custody provision of a Final Judgment and Decree of divorce entered in the Superior Court of Gwinnett County in the State of Georgia. Both parties submitted motions for summary judgment to the District Court, whereupon the District Court denied Petitioner's Motion for Summary Judgment and granted Respondent's Motion for Summary Judgment. Petitioner's appeal to the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals ensued.

The appeal to the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals sought reversal of the granting of Respondent's Motion for Summary Judgment. On November 27, 1997, simultaneously with the granting of Respondent's Motion to Strike portions of Petitioner's brief and addendum, the granting of Petitioner's motion to supplement his records excerpts and the denial of Petitioner's Motion to strike Respondent's brief and to bar her from oral argument, the Eleventh Circuit affirmed without opinion. The present Petition for Writ of Certiorari ensued.

At issue is a specific provision of a custody order from which Petitioner did not seek review before the State's highest court (or, for that matter, any other Court).[1]

1. Arguably, the underlying § 1983 action was an attempt to appeal the Custody Order.

B. Statement of Facts

The parties have one child; to wit: Zachary L. Falkenberry, born October 20, 1988. Respondent instituted a divorce action in the Superior Court of Gwinnett County in 1992. Custody of Zachary was an issue and the Superior Court of Gwinnett County transferred the custody and visitation issues to the Juvenile Court of Gwinnett County for determination.

Both parties engaged in discovery and, on August 23, 1993, after notice, a hearing was held in the Juvenile Court of Gwinnett County. Both parties were represented by counsel. Both parties presented the testimony of witnesses and documents in support of their respective positions on the custody issue. On September 7, 1993, the Juvenile Court of Gwinnett County entered its Custody Order.

Pursuant to the terms of said Custody Order, the parties were awarded joint legal and physical custody of Zachary. Petitioner was awarded primary joint physical custody of Zachary and the Juvenile Court set forth a secondary joint physical custodial visitation schedule for Respondent in the event the parties were unable to otherwise agree. At the time of the hearing, both parties lived within three blocks of each other in Snellville, Georgia and Petitioner testified at the hearing that he had no intention of moving away. The custody order set forth alternate weekend secondary joint custodial visitation for Respondent along with one overnight secondary custodial visitation during each week. The Juvenile Court also provided for holiday and extended visitation.

The Custody Order also provided as follows:

> In the event that either the Wife [Respondent] or the Husband [Petitioner] moves from the metropolitan

> Atlanta area, i.e., Metropolitan Statistical Area as defined by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), the primary residence of the Child shall be with the non-moving parent. The parent who relocated shall have the same visitation rights with the Child as now set forth for the Wife [Respondent] and the party receiving primary physical custody shall have the same rights as set forth for the Husband [Petitioner].

It is this provision which Petitioner sought to have the District Court declare unenforceable.

All other issues, including child support, remained to be determined by the Gwinnett County Superior Court. On December 31, 1993, the parties executed an Agreement resolving all remaining issues in the divorce action. In the Agreement, the parties expressly incorporated the Custody Order of September 7, 1993:

> The issue of custody has been transferred to the Juvenile court of Gwinnett County, with a Custody Order entered herein on September 7, 1993, Juvenile Court Docket Number 93-0590-2, and the parties hereto are ordered to abide by and comply with said Juvenile Court Order, except that Paragraph 1 shall be amended to reflect the following:
>
> > Subparagraph (k) [which provided the Respondent with one overnight secondary custodial visitation per each week] shall be amended to reflect the hours of visitation to begin at 4:30 p.m. until 8:00 p.m.

The Settlement Agreement was incorporated into the Gwinnett County Superior Court's Final Judgment and Decree of January 3, 1994. At no time did Petitioner move to have either the Custody Order or the Final Judgment and Decree reconsidered, vacated, set aside or reheard. At no time did Petitioner move for a new trial in the Juvenile Court. At no time did Petitioner request from either the Juvenile Court or the Superior Court a Certificate of Immediate Review. At no time did Petitioner apply to the Georgia Supreme Court or the Georgia Court of Appeals for a discretionary review. At no time did Petitioner file a Notice of Appeal; nor has Petitioner, until now, petitioned for a Writ of Certiorari from the United States Supreme Court. In fact, until the § 1983 action was filed, Petitioner did not raise any objections or put forth any arguments as to the constitutionality of the visitation provision contained in ¶ 1(n) of the Custody Order.

On or about August 1, 1994, Petitioner moved to Cartersville, Georgia with Zachary. Cartersville is within the Metropolitan Atlanta Statistical Area, but is sixty-five miles from Respondent's place of residence. Respondent must now travel over one hundred and twenty miles to exercise visitation; thereby rendering her ability to exercise her weekday visitation an impossibility due to her work schedule.

Petitioner states in the underlying action that he intends to move to Chattanooga, Tennessee so that he could work for his father. This is outside the Metropolitan Atlanta Statistical Area and would result in Respondent becoming the primary joint physical custodian and Petitioner becoming the secondary joint physical custodian.

Petitioner sought to have ¶ 1(n) of the Custody Order declared invalid, claiming that this provision violates his Fourteenth Amendment Due Process rights and his right to

interstate travel. Petitioner has not petitioned a State court of competent jurisdiction to modify the Custody Order.

C. Petitioner's Misstatement of Facts

The Petitioner alleges for the first time that:

> Ms. Taylor, who lives in Snellville, Georgia, would have just as much time with her son as she enjoys under the current plan. Furthermore, as Mr. Falkenberry has agreed to handle all of the transportation, she would not be inconvenienced.

Writ, at 9. Petitioner also states, without any support in the record, that Respondent's contact with the child would not be diminished by Petitioner moving to Chattanooga, Tennessee. Writ, at 14. There is nothing in the record to reflect that any such agreement has ever been reached, let alone broached. In fact, no such agreement exists. Additionally, the visitation provisions of the Custody Order provides that Zachary will have weekday overnight visitation with Respondent which, due to Petitioner's relocation to Cartersville, Georgia, Zachary has not been able to enjoy due to the already great distances involved. The record does reflect that Zachary's visitation with his mother has already been curtailed due to Petitioner's moving over sixty miles away from Respondent and that Petitioner has not cooperated with transportation as of the filing of his Petition for Writ of Certiorari to this Court.

Petitioner also asserts that he will lose custody without any further judicial proceedings if he is to move to Chattanooga, Tennessee. This misrepresents the fact that Petitioner has continually had the opportunity to petition a State court of competent jurisdiction for a modification of custody.

REASONS FOR DENYING THE WRIT

I.

PETITIONER IS BARRED FROM PETITIONING FOR A WRIT OR CERTIORARI AS HE HAS FAILED TO EVEN ATTEMPT TO SEEK REVIEW BY THE HIGHEST COURT IN THE STATE OF GEORGIA.

There has been no final judgment or decree rendered by the Georgia Supreme Court, the highest court in the State of Georgia. The opinion from which Petitioner appeals is from a lower Georgia court's custody order. It is undisputed that Petitioner failed to seek review from any of the Georgia State courts. Thus, a writ of certiorari cannot be granted. 28 U.S.C. § 1257.

> (a) Final judgments or decrees rendered by the highest court of a State in which a decision could be had, may be reviewed by the Supreme Court by writ of certiorari. . .

Id.

The District Court recognized this fact:

> The Custody Order became a final state court order when [Petitioner] failed to file an appeal of the order within 30 days of its entry. *See* O.C.G.A. § 5-6-35(d) (requiring appeals of divorce or child custody orders to be filed with the Clerk of the Georgia Supreme Court within 30 days of entry of order).

Thus, at the threshold, Petitioner is barred from obtaining a writ of certiorari. *Street v. New York, NY*, 394 U.S. 1354 (1969)

(holding that the United States Supreme Court lacks the power to consider the constitutionality of a state Court's decision unless that issue has been first decided by the State's highest court); *Board of Directors of Rotary International v. Rotary Club of Duarte*, 481 U.S. 537, 550 (1987) (holding that, when "the highest state court has failed to pass upon a federal question, it will be assumed that the omission was due to want of proper presentation in the state courts, unless the aggrieved party in this Court can affirmatively show the contrary.").

II.

THE FEDERAL DISTRICT COURT CORRECTLY DECIDED THAT IT DID NOT HAVE JURISDICTION TO REVIEW THE LOWER STATE COURT DECISION ESTABLISHING CHILD CUSTODY RIGHTS.

The "Rooker-Feldman Doctrine" establishes the general rule that federal district courts do not have jurisdiction to entertain direct challenges to state court decisions. *Rooker v. Fidelity Trust Company*, 263 U.S. 413 (1923); *District of Columbia v Feldman*, 460 U.S. 462, 482, 103 S. Ct. 1303, 75 L. Ed. 2d 206 (1983); *Powell v. Powell*, 840 F.2d 464, 466 (11th Cir. 1996).

> The doctrine applies not only to claims actually raised in the state court, but also to claims that were not raised in the state court but are "inextricably intertwined" with the state court's judgment.

Feldman, 460 U.S. 462, 482 (1983). "This rule also applies even though, as here, the challenge is anchored to alleged deprivations of federally protected due process . . . rights." *Feldman*, 460 U.S. at 485 (1983).

While limited exceptions have been established by this Court, the present Writ does not present a factual predicate for interfering with a lower State court's un-appealed, measured and considered domestic relations order. Petitioner's reliance on *Pennzoil v. Texaco*, 481 U.S. 1 (1987), and *Mitchum v. Foster*, 407 U.S. 225 (1972) for an inroad into the "Rooker-Feldman Doctrine" is misplaced. In *Pennzoil*, the "Rooker-Feldman Doctrine" is discussed by the majority in the context of the history of the action in the lower federal courts. In *Mitchum*, this Court determined that § 1983 falls within the "expressly authorized" exception to the anti-injunction statute. *Mitchum*, 407 U.S. at 242. However, this Court went on to reaffirm that this Court did not "question or qualify in any way the principles of equity, comity, and federalism that must restrain a federal court when asked to enjoin a state court proceeding". *Id.*, at 243. In both *Pennzoil* and *Mitchum*, appeals in state courts were pending in the relative State courts. Here, the State court action is over and Petitioner failed to appeal. Thus, concerns of injury to the Petitioner pending the outcome of an appeal in a State court simply do not exist, as in *Pennzoil* and *Mitchum*.

The "Rooker-Feldman Doctrine" has been recognized as being especially applicable where child custody issues are involved:

> The federal judiciary has traditionally abstained from deciding cases concerning domestic relations . . . . As a result, federal courts generally dismiss cases involving divorce and alimony, child custody, visitations [sic.] rights, establishment of paternity, child support, and enforcement of separation or divorce decrees still subject to state court modification.

Ingram v. Hayes, 866 F.2d 368 (11th Cir. 1988).

The policy supporting the domestic relations exception was concisely stated in *Rogers v. Janzen*, 891 F.2d 95, 97-98 (5th Cir. 1989):

> Federal courts have long maintained that a domestic relations exception to federal jurisdiction, founded on "the strong state interest in domestic relations matters, the competence of state courts in settling family disputes, the possibility of incompatible federal and state court decrees in cases of continuing judicial supervision by the state, and the problem of congested dockets in federal courts."

Id.

Petitioner fails to present any facts or law supporting his position that his § 1983 action is not inextricably intertwined with the state court's judgment.[2]

The domestic relations exception recognized that discretion in such matters are best left to the discretion of the State trial court. O.C.G.A. §§ 19-9-1 and 19-9-3 provide the Superior Courts of the State of Georgia (and, by extension, Juvenile Courts) with broad discretion in modifying child custody orders to ensure that the best interests of the child are served. In this

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2. Petitioner's recitation of facts in his affidavit and statement of undisputed facts recites Respondent's alleged failure to exercise visitation, the support system available to him and Zachary in Chattanooga, his inability to work full time, etc. These are the identical issues that would be considered in a modification of custody or visitation action and indicate that the District Court would indeed be delving into the realm of State court jurisdiction. In other words, Petitioner shows that this matter is inextricably intertwined with the custody issues involved in the initial custody order and in any modification action that may be brought.

respect, the State courts have a great interest in the best interests of a child and any modification of a State court order by a federal court would, by its very nature, impact every other aspect of that custody order. Based upon the record presented in this petition, if this Court reversed and remanded and the District Court declared ¶ 1(n) of the Custody Order null and void, Petitioner would remove himself from the State of Georgia with Zachary and thereby obliterate the Respondent's entire secondary joint custodial visitation provisions of the Custody Order and Final Judgment and Decree. As a result, Respondent would have no choice but to bring a modification action pursuant to O.C.G.A. §§ 19-9-1 and 19-9-3. Thus, as in *Rogers*:

> In order to supply the requested relief, a federal district court would be required to revisit the factual determination made prior to awarding custody, and if it reached a contrary conclusion to unsettle the basis of the custody and visitation decision reached and affirmed by the [State] courts; in the end, such a result would no doubt prompt a suit by [Respondent] for custody and visitation reconsideration [or modification], thereby encroaching on the apparent state interest in determining custody and risking incompatible federal and state decrees.

Rogers, 891 F.2d at 98. The unavoidable conclusion is that the Petitioner's § 1983 action is inextricably intertwined with custody issues involving Zachary.

Petitioner alleges that his right to interstate travel is being curtailed by the Custody Order. However, nothing is actually prohibiting Petitioner's relocation. If Petitioner does move to Chattanooga, he would be entitled to exactly that which Respondent would be entitled to if the automatic modification provision were declared void. Both parties were awarded joint

legal and physical custody. Rather than appealing the Custody Order, Petitioner ratified it when incorporating it into the Settlement Agreement of the parties. Additionally, the Georgia Supreme Court has already held that self-executing child custody modification provisions are valid where the parents are joint custodians. *Carr v. Carr*, 263 Ga. 451, 435 S.E. 2d 44 (1993).

Petitioner does not in any way show how his procedural due process rights have in any way been infringed. It is undisputed that Petitioner had notice of the August 23, 1993 final hearing on custody in the Gwinnett County Juvenile Court. Thus, Petitioner did have notice and an opportunity to be heard.[3]

Ironically, Petitioner relies on *M.L.B. v. S.L.J.*, __ U.S. __, 117 S. Ct. 555 (1996) to support his position that his procedural due process rights have been denied. In *M.L.B.*, the Petitioner's due process rights were denied due to the fact that she could not appeal the termination of her parental rights due to her indigence. Here, Petitioner did not even try to appeal the order prohibiting the very rights he now claims are being denied.

It is undisputed that Petitioner appeared at a hearing, was represented by counsel and presented evidence and argument. It is also undisputed that Petitioner ratified this Custody Order in his Agreement with Respondent of December 31, 1993 which was incorporated into the Final Judgment and Decree of Divorce on January 3, 1994. Petitioner never moved for reconsideration or to have the Custody Order or Final Judgment and Decree set aside. These are procedures that were available to him. *Bradley*

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3. Petitioner urged below that the focal point of the procedural due process inquiry is on the relief he could be denied in a modification of custody action. However, Petitioner's claim as to impingement of a liberty interest goes directly and solely to the Custody Order entered by the juvenile court after a hearing to which he had notice and an opportunity to be heard.

v. Bradley, 232 Ga. 717, 208 S.E. 2d 817 (1974); *Hathcock v. Hathcock*, 232 Ga. 719, 208 S.E. 2d 819 (1974). Petitioner never moved for a new trial pursuant to O.C.G.A. § 9-11-60. Petitioner never applied for discretionary review of the Custody Order or the Final Judgment and Decree. Ga. Const. 1983, Art. VI, § VI, ¶ III; O.C.G.A. § 5-6-35. Until now, Petitioner never petitioned for a Writ of Certiorari from the United States Supreme Court to challenge the constitutionality of the Custody Order or the Final Judgment and Decree. *Feldman*, 460 U.S. at 482 & n.16, 103 S. Ct. at 1315 & n.16, 75 L. Ed. 2d 206 (1983) (affirming that United States Supreme Court has exclusive federal jurisdiction over review of state court judgments).[4]

Petitioner's argument that he has or will be denied his procedural due process rights is therefore without merit. In any event, he has failed to raise the constitutional issues in accordance with the procedurally provided state court methods.

> [T]here are adequate state remedies to redress the alleged deprivation of a fair hearing . . . . First and foremost is the existence of an opportunity for appellate review of the proceedings. [A constitutional objection to the Custody Order could have been raised] as an enumeration or error in the appeal of [the Custody Order] or the final judgment . . . .
>
> The Supreme Court has held that there has been no deprivation of procedural due process by state action where the state has provided an adequate post-deprivation remedy. *Parrett v. Taylor*, 451 U.S. 527, 101 S. Ct. 1908, 68 L .Ed. 2d 420 (1980); *Hudson v. Palmer*, __ U.S. __, 104 S. Ct. 3194, 82 L. Ed. 2d 393 (1984). The state remedy need not be identical to, or as extensive as, a remedy for damages

4. Arguably, this ratification constitutes a waiver and estoppel.

> under section 1983, but instead need only be sufficient to satisfy the requirements of procedural due process. . . .

Collins v. Walden, 613 F. Supp. 1306, 1313 (N.D. Ga. 1985).

The *Collins* court goes on to state that

> plaintiff cannot establish a violation of procedural due process if the state has provided an adequate remedy for the alleged deprivation. . . . The fourteenth amendment's due process clause protects only against deprivations of life, liberty, or property *by the state*. *Parratt* teaches that when the state has provided an adequate remedy to redress the alleged deprivation, there has been no deprivation by the state.

Id. at 1318. The burden of showing that the State of Georgia's procedural laws barred the presentation of his constitutional claims is on Petitioner. *Pennzoil*, 107 U.S. at 14. Petitioner's failure to present his federal claim in State court compels the assumption that the State procedures provided adequate remedy, especially where Petitioner cannot argue that he used any available State procedures. *Id.* at 15.

"Because plaintiff was not deprived of procedural due process he cannot state a claim for any denial of substantive due process." *Id.* at 1319 (cites omitted).

As in *Powell*:

> If a federal district court were now to hold in [Petitioner's] favor on his federal claim, that holding would "effectively nullify" the state court's

> judgment. . . . The result would be that the state court's judgment . . . would be collaterally reviewed and reversed in federal court, which is precisely what the Rooker-Feldman doctrine exists to prevent.

Powell, 80 F.3d at 466.

"It is well-established that this court is bound by the same preclusive effect to a judgment by a Georgia court that the judgment would be given in the Georgia courts." *Kremer v. Chemical Construction Corp.*, 456 U.S. 461, 466, 102 S. Ct. 1883, 1889, 72 L. Ed. 2d 262 (1982); 28 U.S.C. § 1738. This is true even though the subsequent action is brought under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. *Allen v. McCurry*, 449 U.S. 90, 101 S. Ct. 411, 66 L. Ed. 2d 308 (1980).

III.

ASSUMING FOR PURPOSES OF ARGUMENT THAT THIS COURT FOUND MERIT IN PETITIONER'S POSITION AND REMANDED TO THE DISTRICT COURT, PETITIONER CANNOT MAINTAIN A § 1983 ACTION AGAINST RESPONDENT AS SHE IS NOT A STATE ACTOR.

Even if this Court were to determine that an exception to the "Rooker-Feldman Doctrine" or the domestic relations exception did exist, Petitioner fails to address the fact that this issue is moot. Petitioner does not challenge the District Court's finding that Respondent is not a state actor and that, therefore, a § 1983 action will not stand. Thus, even if this Court were to ultimately reverse and remand on the "Rooker-Feldman Doctrine" issue, the underlying action cannot be pursued against Respondent as she is not, as a matter of law, a state actor. In essence, Petitioner is seeking an advisory opinion from this Court, which is prohibited. *Steel Company v. Citizens for a*

Better Environment, __ U.S. __, 118 S. Ct. 1003, 1016 (1998) (holding that "jurisdiction is always an antecedent question [and that h]ypothetical jurisdiction produces nothing more than a hypothetical judgment — which comes to the same thing as an advisory opinion, disapproved by this Court from the beginning.") *See also Pennzoil*, 481 U.S. at 11 (holding that "a constitutional determination . . . predicated on a reading of the statute that is not binding on State courts . . . may be discredited at any time — this essentially rendering the federal-court decision advisory and the litigation underlying meaningless.").

To prevail under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must show that the

> conduct complained of was committed by a person acting under color of state law . . . [and] that this conduct deprived [him] of rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution or laws of the United States.

Parratt v. Taylor, 451 U.S. 527, 535, 101 S. Ct. 1908, 1913, 68 L. Ed. 2d 420 (1981), *overruled on other grounds*, *Daniel v. Williams*, 474 U.S. 327, 106 S. Ct. 662, 88 L. Ed. 2d 662 (1986).

The District Court, in its order, pointed out that the United States Supreme Court

> has established a two-part test for determining whether private "conduct allegedly causing the deprivation of a federal right [may] be fairly attributable to the State." *Lugar v. Edmonson Oil Co.*, 457 U.S. 922, 937, 102 S. Ct. 2744, 73 L. Ed. 2d 482 (1982).

R3-14-7. The District Court then quoted that test:

> "First, the deprivation must be caused by the exercise of some right or privilege created by the State or by a rule of conduct imposed by the State or by a person for whom the State is responsible." *Lugar*, 457 U.S. at 937. "Second, the party charged with the deprivation must be a person who may fairly be said to be a state actor." *Id.* A private party
>
> > may only be said to be a state actor . . . because he is a state official, because he has acted together with or has obtained significant aid from the state officials, or because his conduct is otherwise chargeable to the State.
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> *Id.* R3-14-7, 8.[5]

The test is to be applied not only to determine whether a defendant acted under color of authority, but also in determining whether there has been a deprivation of a due process right.

> Because the fourteenth amendment is directed at the states, it can be violated only by conduct that may be fairly characterized as "state action." *Lugar v. Edmonson Oil Company*, 457 U.S. 922, 937, 102 S. Ct. 2744, 2753, 73 L. Ed. 2d 482 (1982). Similarly, section 1983 provides a cause of action only for those deprived of a constitutionally protected right "under color of state law." *Id.* Thus, **a showing of state action is necessary to establish both the deprivation of a fourteenth amendment right and to meet the "under color of" state law requirement of § 1983.**

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5. The District Court assumed for purposes of Summary Judgment that Petitioner had met the first prong of the *Lugar* test.

Bendiburg v. Dempsey, 707 F. Supp. 1318, 1326 (N.D. Ga 1989), *aff'd in part and rev'd in part on other grounds*, 909 F.2d 463 (11th Cir. 1990) (Emphasis supplied) (Cites omitted).

Furthermore, as set forth by the District Court:

> A private party's mere invocation of state legal procedures does not constitute joint participation or conspiracy with state officials satisfying the § 1983 requirement of action under color of law. *Lugar*, 457 U.S. at 939 n.21; *Price v. Hawaii*, 939 F.2d 702, 708 (9th Cir. 1991) (" 'Merely resorting to the courts . . . does not make a party a coconspirator or a joint actor with the judge.' ") (quoting *Dennis v. Sparks*, 449 U.S. 24, 28 (1980), *cert. denied*, 503 U.S. 938 (1992); *Hoai v. Vo*, 935 F.2d 308, 313 (D.C. Cir. 1991) ("It is well established that mere recourse to state or local court procedures does not by itself constitute joint activity with the state sufficient to subject a private party to liability under section 1983."), *cert. denied* 503 U.S. 957 (1992). At a minimum, some overt and significant state participation, other than recourse to state court, is required. *Hoai*, 935 F.2d at 313.

Absent a state actor, Petitioner's underlying action will be dismissed, regardless of whether there is an exception to the "Rooker-Feldman Doctrine". As Petitioner has failed to provide even the slightest basis for inquiry into the status of Respondent as a State actor or person acting under color of authority, his claim against Respondent must fail as a matter of law.

CONCLUSION

For the reasons given above, the Petition for Writ of Certiorari should be denied. Thus, the District Court's Judgment and Order of December 10, 1996 must be affirmed.

Respectfully submitted,

DOUGLAS H. PIKE
118 East Trinity Place
Decatur, Georgia 30030
(404) 479-4400

FRED L. CAVALLI
118 East Trinity Place
Decatur, Georgia 30030
(404) 479-4400

Attorneys for Respondent